

M. Noah Kindred

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S E R M O N:

PREACHED AT
AN EXHIBITION

SACRED MUSICK,

I N L I N C O L N,

On the NINETEENTH of APRIL, 1792.

BY CHARLES STEARNS, A. M.

PASTOR of the CHURCH in LINCOLN.



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S E R M O N, &c.



EXODUS, XV. 1.

*These words in the Verse—*I WILL SING UNTO THE LORD.

THE hour of danger may awaken the defensive passions ; but when men are placed in easy and comfortable circumstances, then is the time for the human mind to display its finer powers. The means of subsistence and security being easily obtained, the faculties of the soul are turned to objects of elegance and taste. At such a period, the sciences are searched out, and all the beauties of art disclose themselves. Those which afford the most intense pleasure, will become prime objects of attention. Musick then will not be the last in the train, but will claim preeminence to many other arts. Hence it need not surprize us that musick early attracted the notice of men, and that in those long lives of
ease

case which rolled away before the flood, *Tubal*, the father of musick, taught his cotemporaries and descendants "to handle the harp, and the organ."*

AFTER such events as the flood, and the dispersion from Babel, the arts could not immediately be reestablished. A considerable space of time must be allowed for the formation of civilized states and empires. Among the first of these was Egypt, whose prosperity, under the administration of Joseph, gave opportunity for the cultivation of the arts.

SOON Egypt, as other old states have done since, began to oppress her colonies. The Israelites in Goshen, felt the weight of lawless power, which gave rise to the wisdom and fame of Moses.

AT that time learning flourished in Egypt, for it is expressly said of Moses, by way of commendation, that he was "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and mighty in words" as well "as deeds."† His sublime genius not only grasped the arts of policy and war, but thought itself not debased, by attention to poetry and musick. The song, the first words of which we have taken for our text, is a sublime proof of his ability. It is the first song, set to musick, of which we have any account in history.

I WILL sing, saith he, unto the LORD. This will lead us to speak of the nature of sacred musick, especially

* Gen. iv, 21.

† Acts vii, 22.

especially of singing ; its application to the worship of God ; its fitness for that purpose, and the examples, by which such an application is warranted.

I. LET us consider the nature of sacred musick, and especially of singing, which is its principal part. It is the expression of devotional thoughts by grand melodious and harmonious sounds, that they may with the greater force be impressed on the mind, and more powerfully move the heart. It hence appears that idle unmeaning sounds, are not worthy of the name of sacred musick or singing; but those, which strongly move the affections, impress the most important sentiments on the mind, or swell the human breast with mighty emotions of holy delight. *Significancy is the soul of musick.*† And though mechanick instruments may have their use; yet the organ, tuned by the hand of God, the human voice, is to be preferred to all other.

THE relation that musick bears to poetry and oratory, may serve to discover its true nature. It is certain that they all proceed upon the same principles ; every elegant oration may be compared to a prose anthem, and may be divided into strains according to musical measures. Syllables and feet, of which verses are made, correspond to the notes and bars of musick. Every anthem may therefore, be considered as an oration ; every regular tune as a poem,

† 1 Cor. xiv, 7—11.

poem, set off to the best advantage, by the happy application of grand, of graceful, and affecting sounds.

IN singing therefore we may unite all the force, and all the graces of oratory, poetry and musick. These are applied to the praise of the Greatest and Best of Beings. Shall we wonder then at the effect of this art, that the skilful performer, fired by its divine enthusiasm, may stamp almost any impression he pleaseth on the human mind. That his audience by turns may be raised to the liveliest ecstasies of joy, or dissolved into tears.

SINGING with distinct, and articulate sounds, is then greatly to be preferred to all musick, which expresseth no certain affection or sentiment. Without expression of real truth, and important ideas, musick is but an unmeaning jingle: It is only when reason and common sense are counsellors, that the empire of art becomes glorious. But when important ideas are expressed by all the powers and graces of motion, accent and sound, with attendant harmony and melody, it becomes an entertainment truly divine. Such were the ideas the ancients had of musick.* For they sung to their harps, the creation of the world--the origin of human kind--the sublime truths of natural and moral philosophy--the works of the Deity in heaven, earth, and sea; the
good

* All the scripture songs are proof.—*Item* VIRG. E. I. 745.

good deeds of patriots—the sublime merits of law-givers—the great actions of heroes and deliverers of their country and, above all, the praises of God.—This leads us,

II. TO speak of the application of musick to the worship of God. The song before us is an example, I will sing unto the LORD saith Moses. And as far as history gives us any evidence, Moses must have the honour of having first applied musick to the worship of the true God. Considering the authority of so great a person as Moses, who talked with God face to face as a man with his friend; this certainly is greatly in favour of the lovers of sacred musick. They cannot have a nobler view in the study of musick, than to be enabled to sing the high praises of their God.

DAVID and others, who afterwards distinguished themselves for psalmody, may be considered as the disciples and imitators of Moses. They, knowing the pleasure which human beings receive from this art, made it the vehicle of such moral, and religious truth, as they wished to be known by all the people.* Till the invention of printing, the surest way of communicating truth from age to age, was by forming it into a song and setting it to musick. And this was especially the case with respect to those truths, which concerned the worship of God. The whole

* And perhaps since too.

whole Book of Psalms is a witness. All the worthiest of the kings of Judah, promoted institutions for singing praises to God. Nor did the blessed Saviour, when he came into the world, impose silence on the lovers of song. For at the holy supper, instituted in perpetual memory of his death, he sung an hymn with his disciples, before he went out unto the Mount of Olives,

WE have sufficient authority to assert in general terms, That from the days of Moses to the present day, it has been the practice of the most enlightened of men, to apply musick to the publick worship of God. For some cause or other, however, the congregational churches have taken less liberty than the majority of Jews, or Christians; who have made use of instrumental musick to attend the vocal. This was the *constant* practice of the Jews. Nor is there any thing in the whole scripture that condemns it, in the least. We must not use our Christian liberty, to the offence of our brethren, or to produce contentions. But wherein it is not offensive to pious minds, nothing hinders the applying of instrumental musick to the publick worship of God.

THE human voice, as the organ tuned by the hand of God, undoubtedly hath the preference. But the mechanick justness and steadiness of instruments, joined with the beautiful variety and
volubility

volubility of the human voice, produceth the most perfect and harmonious concert.

III. WE speak of the fitness of musick for divine worship. It hath every principle of sweet, of pathetick, and forcible expression. Hence its surprising power of moving the affections. The nerves of the human body are probably a system of * chords, which vibrate with intense pleasure to the touches of harmony. And, How can this pleasure be better applied, than to excite affection and love to him whose counsel was wonderful in the formation of man? Or, to settle and fix on our minds the most useful and important truths concerning virtue and religion?

If religion be left undecorated, while all things else abound with ornaments, will not mankind be tempted to forsake her. Expressive musick is that ornament which befits her best. For it affords a pleasure, well fitted to lead the mind to religion. It applies to the greatest number of persons, who need information, or incitement. And great indeed is its power!

As no one is witness of another's feelings, I am obliged to judge from mine own, and on this proof should suppose that most men, if there be general similarity of constitution among them, may not only

* Vide Hartley on Man.

ly hear and relish musick, but feel it as distinctly and intensely, as the sensations of heat and cold.

WHAT efficacy hath sacred musick to steal the soul from the earth, and transport it to the visions of GOD. When those glorious truths and facts, which pertain to our holy religion are set forth, in well adapted sounds, full harmony, clear utterance and lively emphasis; the firm and steady tenor, the acute and sprightly treble, the clear and lofty counter, breaking in turn, like echoes, through the swelling, majestick bass; each sound still fraught with ideas of redeeming love, with the language of prophets, of apostles, of Christ and of GOD—then—then—the enraptured soul, like Elijah in his chariot of fire, soars toward the region of celestial bliss—hears the harps of approaching angels; and beholds the New Jerusalem, descending from the Lord out of Heaven.

FROM the ease with which minds, susceptible of the pleasures of musick receive moral and religious impressions, some have been led to consider insensibility to musick, as the sign of a bad heart. *Shakespeare, whom the people of Britain almost adore, and consider as an oracle in the knowledge of human nature, saith,

“ He that hath no musick in himself
 “ And is not mov’d by concord of sweet sounds,
 “ Is fit for treasons.” —————

YET

* Vide Thomson Seasons—Summer, ver. 1563.

YET let us while we enjoy the pleasures of musick, be charitable to those who are deprived of them. Reason tells us that dulness to the charms of musick, is no more an evidence of a bad heart, than to be deaf, blind, or dumb. In some cases it is a natural defect. In others, a habit of sedateness has quenched the fire of imagination.* It is related of a German mathematician, that attending the king of Prussia's opera, where musick was in its highest perfection, he busied himself in measuring the height and breadth of the room, and in calculating the distance to which the human voice might be distinctly heard. Then, when he had done this, finding nothing else entertaining for him, he left the audience abruptly. Such an instance of insensibility, to the lovers of the muse, will seem almost miraculous,

YET this person behaved himself much better than many others, who not less insensible, are yet less innocent. They disturb the most sublime performances, in honor of Christ and of God, by moving from place to place in the assembly, by jesting, laughing and tumult. If indeed it be, that such have no relish for sacred musick, they ought, in point of civility, not to disturb the holy pleasures of others.

IV. WE are led to the practice of this art by the noblest examples. When the world was created,

* Vid. Philos. de sans souci. Page 178.

ated, it is said, the morning stars, the angels, sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy. If this was not singing in fact, it was something analogous to it, well represented and described by vocal music. Moses and the prophets, David, Solomon, and all the best kings of Judah, were our patterns. *Christ sung an hymn with his disciples at the institution of the holy supper. Whence we may infer, that he intended that the singing of hymns should be as perpetual as that ordinance. The apostles say expressly—Is any merry, let him sing psalms.† And something like this, is according to the scripture, the employment of saints and angels in heaven.

PERMIT me now, agreeably to the sentiments which I have advanced, to address—1st, The choir, who have attended to the cultivation of this holy art—and 2dly, The assembly.

BRETHREN AND SISTERS OF THE CHOIR,
WITH pleasure have we beheld your zeal, and the animated diligence of your † teacher. We have often had our ears refreshed by your agreeable performances. Your attention to speaking your words plain, and full ; to avoiding uncouth and vulgar pronunciation ; to swelling or softening your strains, according to the matter of the song ; to express grief, joy, wonder, &c. by their natural tones,

* Matthew xxvi, 30. † James v, 13.

MR. ISAAC LANE, of Bedford, Massachusetts.

tones, has given you this acceptance. Nature is the standard of taste, and what is truly natural, will always please.

WHEN sounds bold and strong, have set forth the majesty, the power, and eternity of God—when lofty notes celebrated his glories “which transcend the sky”—when menacing tones have shown the dangers of the wicked, “on slippery rocks ready to fall into ruin”—when tender and plaintive accents, called our attention to “Jesus nailed to the tree”—“when voices softer than the gentlest breeze, expressed the care of Jesus over his flock, “hearing their prayers and wiping their tears away”—such touches, so true to nature, could not fail. Mute attention, expressive features, and melting eyes, declared the sensations of the assembly.

To you, we owe the revival of sacred music in this place, which had well nigh slept in silence. So long had our harps hung upon the willows, that we began to fear that they would be wholly useless. But the songs of Zion are revived, and sweeter than before. We give you our thanks, and wish you a blessing from the house of the LORD. We wish you ever the pleasures of those, who sing with the heart, and with the understanding; and above all, of those who live to the praises of their God. We trust that ye are disposed not only to sing in harmony with each other, but to live in concert with

with the commands of GOD, of Christ, and the best interests of civil and domestick society.

PURSUÉ the course you have begun. Cultivate the power of singing the high praises of GOD. Use great prudence towards those who seem not to favour your pursuits, and strict discretion towards all. Thus will your studies be not only pleasing, but in a high degree useful. What a field have you for the exercise of this noble art ! The glories of the Redeemer, the height and depth, the length and breadth of his love ! these doubtless will employ you for the present life, for they shall employ saints and angels to all eternity. Long may your society exist on earth to enliven our devotion ; and at last join the grand choir of saints and angels in heaven.

BRETHREN AND FRIENDS OF THE ASSEMBLY.

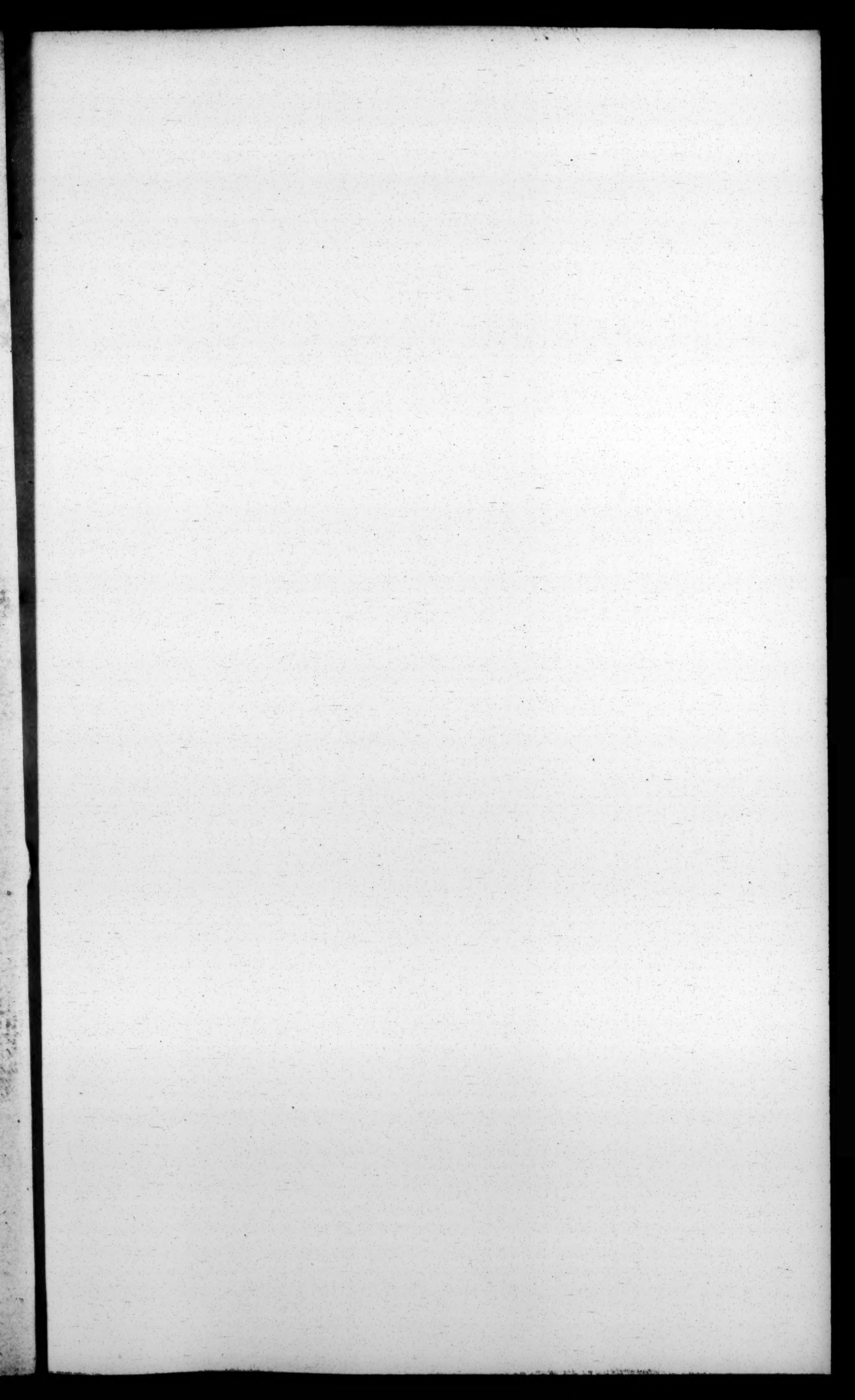
WHAT a mistake is here ! Have we forgot that this anniversary is the blackest of all the days of the year, the anniversary of bloodshed and war, worthy to be covered with the shade of death, that no light may shine upon it. What means this brilliant assembly, these virgin troops, these fingers, these instruments of musick, these preparations for rejoicing. Will the *Nineteenth of April* ever be forgotten?—No, never ! If Moses sung the emancipation of Israel's sons from the slavery of Egypt, we may as justly celebrate our deliverance from oppressions of a similar kind ; and may congratulate one another
on

on the present happy state of our country. Instead of distress, desolation, and carnage, which lately deformed the face of our land, behold the works of peace arising ; and the arts called forth to improve, and adorn our nation. And above all, we possess the gospel of peace, which recordeth the glorious triumphs of the Saviour over the great tyrant and oppressor of man. We rejoice therefore, yea, and we will rejoice—sing praise to the LORD, sing praises !

GOD shall prosper our earthly state, and prepare for us a better and more abiding city. O that the spirit of pure and ardent devotion, might possess the hearts of this people, and prepare them as saints to attend the king of glory ; and enter with him through the everlasting gates.—O GOD ! O blessed Saviour ! let the eternal gates unfold, that the king of glory may enter in, and that we may enter with him to the seats of everlasting bliss.

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